

Philosophies and Ideologies

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Philosophies and Ideologies:

In a world of Advanced Placement and the preference for testing, it becomes ever more difficult to deal with the impact of the “idea” on the course of historical and intellectual development. The teaching of ideas, for lack of a better term, can be a challenge as any idea not made explicit by its creator is open to endless interpretations. We are left then with the need to construct a path for students to try and develop an understanding rather than an answer, and one which is, if not correct, at least valid. In the following two examples of approach, the goal will be to provide two examples for drawing students into the development of historical interpretation and empathy that does not sacrifice our need to remain critical.

Philosophy:

I have the pleasure of teaching a seminar at my home institution that gives students an introduction to several of the great ethical philosophers of the Western tradition. My example here are perhaps the two greatest competing ethical schools of the late enlightenment, that being Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative and Jeremy Bentham’s Utilitarianism. While both schools of thinking look to achieve the desirable goal of an improved and more ethical world, the approach is measurably different.

It is in the subtly of difference that students can see that different ideas can remain valid in their evidence and approach. The existence of one valid interpretation does not have to negate a competing idea. For Kant the answer to all morally philosophical questions is ruled by the “Categorical Imperative,” that which we choose to do is something we would accept as a universal law. Conversely, Utilitarian’s reject this focus on intent and reason in preference for outcomes, which they see as the only clear sign of an efficacy. Bentham’s rule being stated as “the greatest good for the greatest number, without the intentional cause of harm.”

I have attached URLs that have a presentation, PPT and some resources for each of these topics (Kantianism and Utilitarianism). For students, having

been given a basic understanding of each, they can begin the process of “doing” philosophy rather than just reading about it. Present them with historical or present problems and ask how they might approach a solution from either perspective, knowing they are creating valid, not “correct” answers.

http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/consider_ethics/2/

http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/consider_ethics/1/

Ideologies:

Although it generally does not appear in history classes until after 1815, the word “ideology” is used a great deal. The best definition I have found and the one that allows for effective instruction on the impact of any specific ideology in the 19th or 20th century is: “the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.”¹

The best place to engage students in clear “ideologies” is under the banner of totalitarianism. The three great ideologies of the 20th century, Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism (Maoism can easily be added) all made use of the mechanics of the totalitarian state. Side by side comparisons between the Fascistic (if you prefer Fascism and Nazism can be grouped) and Communist world-views make clear their overall distinctions. Both camps made clear their urge to re-invent the human experience, although the final outcome is clearly different. But in the study of these differences one can see the “...theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program” which will allow for the real discussion. Rather than label anything that revolves around an idea as an ideology – and what doesn’t after all – speak to something that was undoubtedly an all-consuming ideal.

One must first establish the basic drivers of each. For the Fascist or Nazi world we have a hyper-ethnic nationalism combined with an emphasis on expansion. For the Stalinist or Maoist world there is the emphasis on class warfare and a reinvention of human production. With the introduction of totalitarianism one can see the similarity of the path each ideology took, which are more common than would initially appear. As each ideology looks to initially program the nation to its own political likeness, it made ruthless use of the power and apparatus of the state. While the intended

outcomes of course were different, the mechanisms were the same: a single political party, control of education, mass propaganda, multiple layers of police control (not just a secret police), some level of direction over the economy, domination of the military, and finally the creation of a “cult of personality” for the leader.

Here we have the potential for several teachable topics. Given some brief readings or even summaries (or if need be your overview) see if students can create a list of guiding elements for each. How does each view freedom of speech, or military power, or wealth? These allow for cross comparison. Then students, armed with the goals of each ideology, can build the necessary mechanics of its totalitarian state. Again this is where the ideologies starkly overlap. A final idea for a project, which can be completed as a paper or as a student (or small group of students) presentation is an annotated power point of a specific propaganda topic. For example modest research online will yield a trove of posters and other propaganda images and more than enough information on topics ranging from the Cult of Mao to Nazi race policy to Soviet Agriculture.

Hitler (good, brief summary of key points in Mein Kampf):

<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/riseofhitler/kampf.htm>

Stalin (Some of his writing/background):

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/index.htm>

Propaganda PPT:

<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/proflearningday/2014/history/7/>

Conclusion:

Introducing students, and ourselves, to the history of ideas opens an often neglected aspect of historical inquiry. Without it, the ability to accurately generate empathy for historical actors and situations is impossible. It does require some reading up front, but the effort is quickly rewarded in allowing us to move historically distant and often two-dimensional characters, be they good men like Kant and Bentham, or wholly evil like Hitler or Stalin, into a more nuanced illumination.

(Want This? Doesn't have to be included, but it might allow for essays to be more easily searched?)

Habits of Mind:

Interrogate texts and artifacts, posing questions about the past that foster informed discussion, reasoned debate and evidence-based interpretation.

Perceive past events and issues as they might have been experienced by the people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology>.